

Project Title:A Space & Time for Storytelling: Reconfigurations of Spatial & Temporal Experience in the Work of I

Abstract:

This project aims to identify the critical possibilities offered by the intersection of storytelling and collective memory in the short stories of the Urdu writer Intizar Husain (b. 1925). Recent scholarship on South Asian literary cultures has consciously turned its attention to the two-way process by which literary production both shapes and is shaped by social forces, in addition to historical and political exigencies and this study aims to examine Husain's work in a similar vein as both forging and being shaped by the postcolonial literary culture in Pakistan. Husain, who begins his career in the aftermath of the Partition of India in 1947, responds to this moment of violent rupture by drawing on his childhood memories of life in a largely rural setting in the United Provinces in colonial India and the composite Indo-Muslim culture which includes such diverse influences as Twelver Shiism, Sufi aphorisms, Hindu mythology and Buddhist Jataka tales. While critics have decried his stories for being excessively nostalgic in their attempts to recreate images from a largely syncretic North Indian milieu that is more or less irretrievably lost in post-Partition Pakistan, his ability to rework familiar narratives from South Asian collective memory into modern Urdu short stories has also been the source of his acclaim both at home and across the border in India where his work has been published in both Urdu and Hindi indicating the transnational potential of his storytelling. Even though his work has been translated into English, Husain is still virtually unknown in the Western academia outside the field of South Asia Studies. I would like to suggest that by invoking traditional images of rootedness in a particular space and time, Husain's literary representations, instead of emphasizing loss actually make productive use of nostalgia by positing storytelling as a resilient form of critical praxis that can allow for more meaningful ways of not just relating to the past, specifically the Indo-Muslim past, but also and perhaps more importantly, inhabiting the present in post-colonial Pakistan.